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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the representations of Asian Americans as the model minority and as perpetual foreigners play off one another to shape the positioning and experiences of Asian American students in U.S. schools and maintain the dominant racial order in the United States. Although the representation of Asian Americans as a high-achieving and assimilated racial group (i.e., the model minority) may appear to be a positive stereotype, it serves hegemonic functions (in the way it maintains White supremacy), homogenizes the diversity among Asian Americans, and perpetuates the notion that Asian Americans do not face racism or have any social needs. Co-existing with the model minority stereotype is the foreigner representation. Asian Americans constantly and continually face assumptions of them as foreigners and as "unAmerican," regardless of the generation in the United States they represent. This representation denies Asian Americans their "American" status and maintains their position outside the mainstream culture. The model minority representation functions as defining the "good" Asian while the foreigner representation functions as defining the "bad" Asian. Both representations demand that Asian Americans meet model minority standards and deny, relinquish, and reject any part of them that is perceived by the dominant culture as being "foreign." Yet, Asian Americans can never shake the foreigner label and are resented for their position as model minorities. The two seemingly opposing representations place Asian American students in a peculiar and vulnerable position in the racial order that affects not only how they are treated and perceived by nonAsians but also how they perceive themselves and the people around them (nonAsians). Other ways in which these influences affect the schooling experience of Asian Americans are explored. Analyzing the hegemonic process may help Asian Americans break free so that they can make choices that are based more on themselves than on others. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

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**(Op)posing Representations:
Disentangling the Model Minority and the Foreigner**

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Abstract

In this paper I examine how the representations of Asian Americans as the *model minority* and as *perpetual foreigners* play off of one another to shape the positioning and experiences of Asian American students in U.S. schools and maintain the dominant racial order in the U.S. Although the representation of Asian Americans as a high-achieving and assimilated racial group (i.e., the model minority) may appear to be a positive stereotype, it serves hegemonic functions (in the way it maintains White supremacy), homogenizes the diversity among Asian Americans, and perpetuates the notion that Asian Americans do not face racism or have any social needs. Co-existing with the model minority stereotype is the foreigner representation--i.e., Asian Americans constantly and continually face assumptions of them as foreigners and as un-"American," regardless of what generation they are in the U.S. This representation denies Asian Americans their "American" status and maintains their position outside of the mainstream culture.

The model minority representation functions as defining the "good" Asian while the foreigner representation functions as defining the "bad" Asian. Both representations demand that Asian Americans meet model minority standards and deny, relinquish, and reject any part of them that is perceived by the dominant culture as being "foreign." Yet, Asian Americans can never shake the foreigner label and are resented for their positioning as model minorities. The two seemingly opposing representations place Asian American students in a peculiar and vulnerable position in the racial order which affects not only how they are treated and perceived by non-Asians but also how they perceive themselves and the people around them (non-Asians). I will further examine how these influences shape the schooling experiences of Asian Americans.

Our identities, overdetermined by history, place and sociality, are lived and imagined through the discourses of knowledge we employ to make sense of who we are, who we are not, and who we can become.

(Britzman, 1992, p.5)

My research on race relations¹ in U.S. schools through an examination of racial and ethnic identity construction²--i.e., how an individual identifies herself in relation to how she is constructed by the dominant racial discourse--has revealed a complicated relationship between identities at the personal level and discourses of knowledge created by the racial order at a structural level. It is within this relationship that the symbolic realm (in which histories, experiences, and people are represented) and lived realities collide, interact, and co-exist. It is also within this relationship that identities are created, imposed, appropriated, and embraced. As McCarthy and Crichlow (1993) point out, "Issues of identity and representation directly raise questions about who has the power to define whom, and when, and how" (p. xvi). The authors emphasize that often people in marginalized positions do not have central control over the production of images about themselves in U.S. society.

In the dominant U.S. racial discourse, which has evolved from a history of Euro-centric representations, people of color have been cast in monolithic characterizations that homogenize diverse populations into essentialized racial groups. In addition, this racial discourse perpetuates the representation of people of color as the Other, and the White, European American culture as the mainstream culture and as the norm. In so doing, these stereotypical representations of different

¹My use of the term "race relations" encompasses all issues of race at both the macro-level (e.g., policies, legislation, etc.) and the micro-level (e.g., experiences, identities, interactions, etc.). It also refers to issues between, among, and within racial groups.

²Racial and ethnic identity construction are integrally influenced by other social identities such as class, gender, and sexual orientation. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will focus on the significance of race and ethnicity.

racial populations serve as effective tools to maintaining the power and status of the dominant culture. Locked within confining stereotypes, many of us, the model minorities, the noble savages, the Black athletes and musicians, struggle between fulfilling roles that bring us "success" and rejecting them as oppressive mechanisms, unable to see other alternatives.

Also, the U.S. racial order imposes upon us institutionalized racial categorizations that are not neutral but are burdened with politics, status, and power. We are forced to make choices among the categorizations and then to act as individuals and with others within them. Every time I label myself, it is a response to someone or some institution that insists that I do. Thus, with which population(s) I identify myself is a response to a particular history which has already identified me.

Making sense of who we are, who we are not, and who we can become, then, is a process laden with commonalties, loyalties, power struggles, and survival instincts. It is at once an instinctive process that occurs from the inside out which involves community, acceptance, and comfort, and yet also a forced process from the outside in which imposes categorizations and representations. Much of the tension between these processes derive from the conflict between the structural insistence to recognize only one social identity (e.g., race, gender, or socioeconomic background) at a time and the individual reality of multiple intersecting identities that are always affecting and effecting our experiences.

What needs to be examined then, are the reality effects of and the struggles inherent within the complex dimensions of representation. Specifically, what are the discourses of knowledge that we employ and how do we employ them to make sense of who we are, who we are not, and who we can become? Also, how do the ways that our identities are constructed and the ways we construct our identities affect and are affected by our interracial relations and broader race relations? In this

paper I will focus on the dominant racial ideology that permeates the social order. This racial ideology structures our ways of thinking, acting, and our perceptions of each other based on our perceived and imposed racial identity. More specifically, I will examine how *discourses* and *representations* are used as tools to teach and socialize people into the dominant racial ideology, and how they validate and perpetuate this ideology. I will focus on two representations of Asian Americans³--the model minority and the perpetual foreigner--and discuss how they operate to maintain the racial order.

Interrogating the Dominant Racial Discourse

Discourses are an effective tool to maintaining a particular ideology.

Britzman (1992), defines *discourse* as:

the particular language social groups use to interpret events and to make sense of the self and the other. A discourse becomes powerful when it is institutionally sanctioned and thus governs how something is said as it makes present communities of agreement and disagreement. Forms of discourse intone particular orientations, values, interests, and thus versions of how power, authority, and knowledge are represented. (p. 3)

While racial discourse provides a language that allows deliberations at both the macro- and micro-levels of society to take place, it also serves to confine these deliberations within a particular "reality," i.e., a reality that is defined by the dominant racial ideology.

Recently, scholars in the field of Asian American studies have critiqued how a Black/White dichotomy has framed the U.S. racial discourse (see, for example, Cho, 1993; Hune, 1995; Lee, 1996; Okihiro, 1994). Stacey Lee (1996), for example, argues that, because the dominant discourse of race focuses on the relations between

³I use *Asian Americans* to refer to immigrants, refugees, and the U.S.-born descendants of immigrants from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Blacks and Whites, most U. S. Americans do not view Asian Americans as legitimate racial minorities.⁴ Lee cites three categories of reasons given for the exclusion of Asian American perspectives from discussions of race: 1) that there are not enough Asian Americans to warrant consideration; 2) that Asian Americans are perceived as unassimilable foreigners as opposed to U. S. minorities; and 3) the stereotype that Asian Americans do not have any problems, i.e., they are the model minority. Lee adds that, ironically, this last category of reasons for excluding Asian Americans from discussions of race is the very way in which Asian Americans receive the most attention in these discussions. "That is, when Asian Americans are included in the discourse of race it is usually to talk about their 'success'" (p. 5).

I argue that it is difficult to include Asian Americans in discussions of race in ways that address our complex experiences because of how racism and race relations are defined within the Black/White dichotomy. Within the Black/White racial discourse, the representation of people of color is largely based upon the experiences of the Black American population in the United States. Thus, for example, racism is defined as the legacy of slavery--it is represented as violence, poverty, crime, unemployment, and low academic achievement. Certainly, these *are* effects of racism, and understanding and analyzing the experiences of Black Americans and Black/White relations are crucial to understanding race relations in the United States. Yet, by confining our thinking and discussions about race to the Black/White dichotomy, we are denying other qualitatively different forms of racism and excluding the voices and experiences of other populations of color. For example, many of the issues that Asians and Asian Americans encounter, issues around immigration, citizenship, language, labor exploitation, and transnationalism, are not integrated into U. S. society's discussions of race and race relations.

⁴My use of the term *minority* refers specifically to the subordinated status that people of color have occupied and currently occupy in the United States. This minority status signifies power struggles rather than numerical differences between racial populations.

When Asian Americans *are* included in larger discussions of race, they are most often considered only vis-à-vis Black/White relations. This occurs in at least two ways. One way is that U. S. race relations is presented in a hierarchical framework, with White Americans at the top, Black Americans at the bottom, and all other populations in between. While there is definitely something to be said about the stratification of groups based on race, this framework only allows into consideration the roles and experiences of Asian Americans that fit on this racial hierarchy. It precludes an understanding of Asian Americans as anything but something that is "like-Whites," "like-Blacks," "less than Whites," or "more than Blacks." It also sets up a hierarchy of racism--i.e., which groups has it worse, which group has it better--rather than encouraging an understanding of how the experiences of different populations are linked to the formation and maintenance of the racial order.

(Op)posing Representations

Another way, and a related way, that Asian Americans are considered vis-à-vis Black/White relations is that the roles and experiences of Asian Americans are considered only in how they affect Black/White relations. An example would be the popular representation of Asian Americans as the *model minority*. Before I elaborate on this point, I want to explain what I mean by *representations*. I am referring to the ways that people are grouped and characterized by the dominant culture. Representations erase individuality and diversity within a group of people, creating monolithic and essentializing images. Stereotypes are an example, as well as more subtle images, thoughts, and feelings that we associate with people based upon particular characteristics (such as class, religious affiliation, where they are from, race, ethnicity, etc.). Representations of people are very powerful. They shape our language and thinking, and they affect our attitudes and views. In addition,

they affect our perceptions of others and of ourselves even when our life experiences contradict those monolithic stereotypes. In so doing, representations serve the purpose of validating and perpetuating themselves and a dominant ideology.

Although there are a number of stereotypes of Asian Americans (e.g., of Asian men as sly and conniving businessman, masters of martial arts, and asexual, and of Asian women as being exotic and submissive), I will focus on the *model minority* and *foreigner* stereotypes in this paper and how they affect the experiences of Asian American students in U.S. schools.

The Model Minority as the Good Asian

The model minority image emerged during the 1960s and in the midst of the civil rights struggles. Prior to the 1960s, Asian Americans were seen as devious, inscrutable, unassimilable and in other overtly negative ways (Lee, 1996). The model minority image, however, presents Asian Americans as having succeeded in U.S. society, despite past discrimination, through hard work and without government assistance or complaint (Osajima, 1988). Other characteristics of the model minority image include passivity and conformity (Okimoto, 1971). The dramatic shift in the portrayal of Asian Americans exposes the constructed and strategic nature of representations. Thus, the model minority representation was constructed at a critical point in the nation's history to serve as proof of American democracy and meritocracy (Wong, 1971). This representation maintains the social order by positioning different racial populations in different roles and places on a racial hierarchy. It also places Asian Americans in a precarious position by creating the perception that Asian Americans do not face racism and do not need any social services.

According to the model minority stereotype, Asian American students do exceedingly well academically despite language difficulties, life hardships, and a low

socioeconomic background. According to Divoky (1988), this image contradicts the dominant sense of the way students of color achieve in schools. It draws curiosity from the dominant group and is sometimes perceived as threatening, which speaks to how the model minority can actually do *too* well and become a threat to the dominant group. Also, the stereotype of Asian American students as being polite, submissive, and hardworking can bring additional problems for some of the students when teachers expect more from them academically, and, by assuming them to be self-sufficient, teachers can overlook a lot of their problems and needs.

The model minority myth also operates effectively by placating, deceiving, and disillusioning Asian Americans. It convinces many of us that we can achieve the "American Dream" if we work hard, it reminds us that we are doing better than other populations of color (so we better not complain), and it tells us that if we are not doing well, it is because we have not tried hard enough or are too foreign and unassimilable to live up to model minority standards. Thus, the myth also functions to prevent some Asian Americans from critiquing the racist nature of the social order.

Furthermore, the model minority stereotype places Asian Americans in a position "higher" than other populations of color on the racial hierarchy. This social positioning maintains the racial order by pitting populations of color against each other. With people of color busy vying for higher status on the racial hierarchy, there is less attention paid to challenging it.

In school, the model minority stereotype affect interracial relations in a number of ways. As Lee (1996) points out in her ethnographic study of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic high school, the model minority stereotype positions Asian American students in ways that maintain White supremacy. According to Lee (1996), for some of the Asian American students she studied, the model minority stereotype served to support their negative stereotypes of African Americans and

the belief that they are better than the African American students. In addition, Lee found that intra-racial hostility among the Asian American students existed because the Asian American students who wanted to emulate the model minority standards looked down upon the Asian American students who did not value academic success and/or who came from poor socioeconomic backgrounds because they felt these students were giving Asian Americans a bad image, i.e., they were not living up to the model minority stereotype.

In terms of how the model minority stereotype affected the way Asian American students were perceived by the Black and White students in the school, Lee found that the Black and White students responded differently to the Asian American students relative to their own social positions in the school. Most of the Black and White students did not have any close friendships with the Asian American students and based their knowledge of Asian Americans on the model minority image. According to Lee (1996), "academically and socially successful white students who were secure in their status held positive images regarding Asian Americans. . . . These students resisted any challenge to the model minority stereotype. According to the successful white students, Asian American 'success' was proof of equal opportunity" (p. 95).

For most of the African American students at Academic High, the model minority representation was a source of resentment towards the Asian American students. According to Lee (1996),

Although white students were well represented in the upper ranks and in the higher tracks, the majority of African American students concentrated their criticism on what they perceived to be the overrepresentation of Asians in the academic elite. . . . The model minority stereotype serves to reinforce the racial order by focusing on Asian American success and redirecting attention away from whites. (p. 99)

At Academic High, academic achievement is the most important way to gain insider status. Thus, given the competitive nature of the model minority stereotype, African American students believed that a gain for Asian American students meant a loss for them.

The Foreigner as the Bad Asian

A contradictory image which co-exists comfortably with the model minority representation is that of Asian Americans as *perpetual foreigners*. This image has existed since the first arrival of Asians in North America and has endured and served to define Asian Americans as outsiders of U.S. mainstream life.⁵ Asian Americans constantly and continually face assumptions of them as foreigners and as un-"American,"⁶ regardless of what generation they are in the United States and how long Asian Americans have lived in and contributed to the building of the United States. Lowe (1996) argues that, "In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally" (p. 4, original emphasis). Lowe goes on to argue that,

the project of imagining the nation as homogenous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally "foreign" origins antipathetic to the modern American society that "discovers," "welcomes," and "domesticates" them. A national memory that haunts the conception of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the "foreigner-within," even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before. (pp. 5-6)

⁵Constructions of Asian Americans as foreigners were institutionalized through numerous immigration acts that restricted and regulated Asian American settlement in the United States (see, for example, Chan, 1991 and Takaki, 1989).

⁶I choose to use the term "American" in quotes because it signifies a socially constructed concept that is a crucial component in U.S. race relations and racial identity construction, which are central issues within this thesis. It must be recognized, however, that the term was appropriated to refer to U.S. culture and White, European Americans, denying other people in North and South America their entitlement as Americans. Due to this appropriation, there are North and South American people who reject being identified as "American" altogether (e.g., identifying as an indigenous person rather than as a Native American or an American Indian).

Thus, in order to preserve a homogenous construction of what and who is an "American," there needs to be a construction of what and who is *not* "American," i.e., the foreigner. The Oriental/Asian has historically served and still serves to fill the role of the foreigner in U.S. society.

As I have argued elsewhere (see Lei, 1996), an oppressive function of the foreigner image operates through the contradictory notions of "foreign-ness" that the dominant racial ideology maintains. That is, "Asian-ness," when perceived as foreign in the sense of the exotic Orient (i.e., Asian countries and cultures, art, food, dress, etc.) is acceptable and commodified. However, "Asian-ness," when perceived as being foreign in the sense of being un-"American" and unassimilable (i.e., images of Asians who do not speak English or have thick accents, who are bad drivers, who do not know the "ways" of "American culture" and are living lifestyles that are "different" from the White American, mainstream lifestyle) is considered threatening and a problem. Both notions of the foreigner image, as exotic other and as unassimilable, reject Asian Americans as part of the U.S. mainstream society.

In schools, the foreigner representation serves to legitimize the marginalization and harassment of Asian American students. Perceived as foreigners in a society that puts strong emphasis on "being American," Asian American students are seen as outsiders and easy targets of attack. For example, in her study of a multi-racial high school, Semons (1991) found that:

Negative comments about Asians were overheard in the presence of teachers, who did nothing to interrupt them. Students could therefore infer that prejudice against Asians was acceptable, unlike prejudice against blacks. The primary reasons students gave to account for the mistreatment of Asians on their campus was that they were newcomers, they spoke a language that other students did not understand, they were resented for doing well in school, and they were unlikely to retaliate against their attacker. (p. 147)

These perceptions affect all Asian American students but especially immigrant and refugee students who are not proficient in English or speak it with an accent. Also, more recent immigrants and refugees may be less willing or feel less of a need to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Studies have found that students who are perceived by others to fit the foreigner representation face more marginalization and harassment from both non-Asian students and Asian American students who are considered or want to be more assimilated (Lee, 1996; Peshkin, 1991).

Disentangling the Racial Shadow

How are selves produced and reproduced through social interactions, daily negotiations, and within particular contexts that are already overburdened with the meanings of others?

(Britzman, 1992, p. 1)

The model minority representation functions as defining the "good" Asian while the foreigner representation functions as defining the "bad" Asian. Both representations demand that Asian Americans meet model minority standards and deny, relinquish, and reject any part of them that is perceived by the dominant culture as being "foreign." Yet, Asian Americans can never shake the foreigner label and are resented for their positioning as model minorities.

Although the two representations are contradictory to each other, they play off of one another to shape the positioning and experiences of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial order. Asian Americans are the model minority, the foreigner, or both depending on what other individuals and the context need us to be. That is, the powerful function of representations is their readiness to be used in the manner that will maintain the ideology which created them.

As I described earlier, the model minority representation offers Asian Americans a certain amount of social privilege, status, and reward in return for our

role as the model for other "minorities," i.e., we are held up as the standard for other populations of color to meet, and as proof of meritocracy in U.S. society. However, our status as a minority ensures that our social, political, and economical successes and power will be confined to a level that does not threaten the status quo. In addition, the foreigner representation legitimizes the perception of people of Asian decent as not "American," and therefore not qualified to enjoy all the resources that U.S. society has to offer.

In schools, although the representation of Asian American students as high-achieving and quiet students (i.e., model minority) may appear to be a positive stereotype and may garner Asian American students some status in their schools, it serves hegemonic functions (in the way it maintains White supremacy), homogenizes the diversity among Asian American students, and perpetuates the notion that Asian American students do not face racism or have educational needs. Underlying the model minority student stereotype is the perpetual foreigner representation, which, as I described earlier, denies Asian Americans their "American" status, maintaining their position outside of the U.S. mainstream culture. With the recent increase in Asian immigrants and refugees, the foreigner representation has been revived and recreated in U.S. society and schools to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment.

These two stereotypes place Asian American students in a peculiar and vulnerable position. First of all, Asian American students are both praised (by teachers) and resented (by some students) for doing well in school (whether they do well or not). The stereotypes also characterize Asian American students as "nerds" and as weak and passive, which renders them little to no power or social status in schools and vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks.

Asian American students, especially immigrant and refugee students, face racism in schools in the form of discrimination, verbal and physical attacks, and

having their needs neglected. Even when racist incidents are reported by the students, they are largely ignored by teachers and administrators (and many times the victim is blamed for causing trouble) (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992).

Making Sense of Who We Are, Who We Are Not, and Who We Can Become

How, then, do the imposed model minority and foreigner representations, constructed by a racist ideology, affect Asian Americans' sense of self? There are a number of studies which have found that Asian Americans generally have lower levels of self-esteem than White and Black students (Bowler, Rauch, & Schwarzer, 1986; also see studies cited in Pang, 1995). In addition, Osajima (1993) has found that, in his interviews with Asian American college students, silence and ignoring differences, i.e., blending into the mainstream to ignore discrimination were strategies used by Asian American students to protect themselves and survive. Yet, as Osajima suggests, these more subtle injuries of racism for Asian Americans remain hidden and ignored due to the media's emphasis on the successes of Asian American students.

Lee (1996) found that every one of her Asian American informants were aware of the model minority stereotype of them. From my own personal experiences, every single Asian and Asian American I know, including myself, has been asked the question, "Where are you from?"--a question that cannot be satisfied with an answer that refers to a place in the United States, a question which assumes/demands that people of Asian descent cannot be *from* the United States. How, then, do Asian Americans negotiate their identit(ies) within these two hegemonic representations?

In a chapter titled "Encounters with the Racial Shadow," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993) analyzes the internalized racism that is expressed in some of the Asian American literature. Wong writes: "One of the bitterest Necessities for Asian

Americans is having to contend with total devaluation of their Asian ethnicity. If they stomach it, they get caught in a cruel bind: to become acceptable to a racist society, one must first reject an integral part of oneself" (p. 77).⁷ Yet, as Wong goes on to argue,

Swallowing negation creates an unfillable hole in the very core of one's being. To preserve the illusion of psychic wholeness indispensable for sanity, then, one must resist the realization of so impossible and humiliating a demand. Projection, a psychological process that (like bursting and vomiting) reverses the symbolic directionality of eating (introjection), keeps at bay the threatening knowledge of self-hatred. By projecting undesirable "Asianess" outward onto a double--what I term a *racial shadow*--one renders alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it. (pp. 77-78, original emphasis)

Wong uses Asian American literature to show the internal conflict Asian Americans face between rejecting the undesirable "Asianess" as they see it embodied in other Asian Americans and having to acknowledge the fact that they themselves can never shake that undesirable "Asianess."

In this dominant racial discourse, Asian Americans are given the limited choices of being Asian (i.e., "Eastern," "foreign," and un-"American"), Asian-American (i.e., juggling the two distinct "Eastern" and "Western" cultures), or "American" (i.e., "Western" and assimilated). There seems to be something good about being Asian, that is, it gives us a feeling of ancestral connection, a "place" to call home (even if we have never been there) and a sense of cultural pride. For some, this need to refer to a land one has never been to as home tend to be more in response to being rejected as part of the U.S. society. At the same time, it is the Asian part of us that is used to qualify us as the perpetual foreigners. This produces the need to be "100% American" so that we can be accepted by U.S. society and be

⁷ According to Wong (1993), "The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (p. 13).

able to call the United States our home. Yet, Asian Americans can never be truly "Americans" when "true Americans" are defined by the dominant culture as White and European American.

Still, for many Asian Americans, the question of authenticity becomes crucial when we are constantly being mis-identified (as foreigners and as another Asian ethnic population) and denied full "American" status. Thus, there is the rush to prove authenticity as a member of an ethnic population (i.e., Vietnamese, Filipino) because we need a community for refuge. There is also the rush to prove authenticity as an "American" because we are constantly told that we are not "American." The concern with being recognized and accepted as an "American" is one that seems to be particularly strong for Asian Americans as a racial minority due to the ingrained perception of people who "look" Asian as foreigners⁸ and as exotically Oriental.

There are a number of problems with this discourse. First of all, it suggests that there is one rigid and authentic definition of what is Asian (and thus, what is, for example, Thai, Korean, or Filipino) and what is "American." Quite the contrary, the identities, perspectives, purposes, and definitions of Asian and "American" are multiple and always in flux. In his essay about the Indian-American identity,⁹ for example, Radhakrishnan (1994) argues:

If the category "Indian" seemed secure, positive, and affirmative within India, the same term takes on a reactive, strategic character when it is pried loose from its nativity. The issue then is not just "being Indian" in some natural and self-evident way ("being Indian" naturally is itself a highly questionable premise given the debacle of nationalism, but that is not my present concern), but "cultivating Indian-ness" self-consciously for certain reasons; for example, the reason could be one does not want to lose one's past or does not want

⁸The Latino populations may also share a similar experience because of the large number of immigrants within the group.

⁹I hyphenate "Indian-American" here because of the author's use of the hyphen in writing about his own ethnic identity.

to be homogenized namelessly, or one could desire to combat mainstream racism with a politicized deployment of one's own "difference." To put it simply, one's very being becomes polemical. Is there a true and authentic identity, more lasting than mere polemics and deeper than strategies? (pp. 224-225, original emphasis)

Radhakrishnan challenges the assumption of "Indian-ness" as a natural phenomenon that is unitarily defined by looking to India as the source of authentic culture (Ono, 1995). Instead, Radhakrishnan recognizes the complexity and fluidity of identities, and the multiple dimensions and functions inherent in the cultivation of one's identity. Thus, identities serve as more than an inherited label, they can also serve as strategies of resistance and survival.

The notion of what is "American" is problematic as well and also needs to be challenged. Rather than insisting that the image of who and what is U.S. American reflect the diversity and differences within the U.S. population, we allow "American" to be defined physically, culturally, linguistically, historically, politically, socially, religiously, and economically as White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male, and middle-class.

Another problem is the lack of critique of the *need* to prove authenticity as an Asian or as an "American." Joanne Harumi Sechi (cited in Trinh, 1989), for example, writes about the duplicity of cultural pride, "I was made to feel that cultural pride would justify and make good my difference in skin color while it was a constant reminder that I was different" (p. 89). Trinh (1989) argues that the need to retrieve our ethnic "roots" (which many second- and on generation Asian Americans experience at varying levels) is a diversion exercise imposed by the dominant culture:

To persuade you that your past and cultural heritage are doomed to eventual extinction and thereby keeping you occupied with the Savior's concern, inauthenticity is condemned as a *loss of origins* and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values. Being easily offended in your elusive identity and reviving readily an old, racial charge, you

immediately react when such guilt-instilling accusations are leveled at you and are thus led to stand in need of defending that very ethnic part of yourself that for years has made you and your ancestors the objects of execration. (p. 89)

Calling this process of "planned authenticity" a "product of hegemony" and "a remarkable counterpart of universal standardization," Trinh notes how effectively the process silences the cry of racial oppression by encouraging the Other to remember and assert their difference. Asian Americans (regardless of the number of generations in the United States) have been told that their roots are in Asia and have been denied the existence and the establishment of their roots in the United States.

The need to prove authenticity as an "American" takes on the same hegemonic effects. According to Radhakrishnan (1994),

In the diasporan context in the United States, ethnicity is often forced to take on the discourse of authenticity just to protect and maintain its space and history. Does "black" have to be authentic except as pressured by "white"? It becomes difficult to determine if the drive toward authenticity comes from within the group as a spontaneous self-affirming act, or if authenticity is nothing but a paranoid reaction to the "naturalness" of dominant groups? Why should "black" be authentic when "white" is hardly even seen as a color, let alone pressured to demonstrate its authenticity? (pp. 228-229)

Thus, the struggle to prove authenticity maintains the dichotomy of White ("American") and the Other (Asian), which perpetuates the power and authority of White centeredness.

I do not want to diminish the importance of "Asian-ness" (or "Chinese-ness" or "Cambodian-ness") to Asian Americans or the reality of the struggles we call "cultural conflicts." I am taking these issues as a given and asking the following questions: How and why and when are our "Asian-ness" significant? How is our

"Asian-ness" defined and by whom? And, when will we begin recognizing Asian American identities that are rooted in the United States?

What I have presented, in all of its complexity, is still a very simplified picture of the identity construction process of Asian Americans. There are individuals who identify with the model minority representation, some who identify with the foreigner representation, some with both, and some who reject them. However, I believe that the choices made are always in relation to the dominant racial discourse and representations I have outlined. In presenting an analysis of this hegemonic process, my hope is that we will find ways to break free from it so that, one day, who we are and who we can become are choices that are based more on us than others.

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